

[Forgotten Chapter in Lafayette's Civil War]

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Cecil C. Miller

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Forgotten Chapter in Lafayette's Civil War

History Brought to Light

Reference: Lafayette Journal Courier, April 23, 1938

Rebel Prisoners in City; Story of Hospital

In its place one of the imposing structures of Lafayette's earlier days, the graying three-story business building at 209-11 South Street remains as a nearly forgotten monument to an interesting chapter of the city's Civil War history about which little has been written. In this building, now 81 years old, a hospital for rebel prisoners sent to the city was maintained for several weeks during the late winter of 1862. They had been captured in the battle at Fort Donelson which resulted in a major victory for the Union army.

Between 10,000 and 15,000 prisoners were taken [and?] 6,000 of them were sent to Indianapolis which was not able to take care of the great number. Lafayette, Richmond and Terre Haute agreed to accept from 800 to 1,000 each. The 800 sent to Lafayette remained quartered in the city for nearly a month. That was 76 years ago. Except for the old South Street building, known as the Walsh block, most vestiges of the Civil War incident have long since disappeared.

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Local newspapers of 1862 (The Journal, Courier and Argus) gave details of the prisoners' arrival and additional information as been obtained from government records and older residents, although there is not a little contradiction in the different stories.

Prisoners Arrive

It was on Sunday, February 23, 1862 that the prisoners arrived, 806 of them according to the newspaper accounts, this number including several 2 “contrabands” (slaves brought into the Union lines). Several days later a roll call of the [“Secosh”?] as the rebels were called, showed 712 prisoners.

Prisoners who died here were buried in Greenbush cemetery, where their graves may still be found in a row, marked by small, pointed marble stones, in the extreme north-west corner, along Greenbush Street. There are 28 of these stones, although a newspaper account, under date of March 31, 1862, at states that 33 prisoners died.

During the greater part of their stay, the prisoners' barracks were located in the [Sample?] porkhouse, which later became the Dryfus Packing plant, in the south-west part of the city. The sick were kept in Walsh's hall and also in the hospital of [Tippecance?] camp, near the Junction, south of the city, where Union soldiers were recruited and drilled.

Business Men Act

Arriving Feb. 23, all the prisoners except those in hospitals, were taken back to Indianapolis, March 16, 1862, thus remaining here approximately three weeks. Newspapers and other sources do not reveal how long a hospital for sick prisoners was operated here. The last death of a prisoner was recorded April 28, and another reliable source indicates, that medical service for them was provided two months and 10 to 12 days.

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After it was learned that some of the [prisoners?] might be sent here, Lafayette business men met, Friday evening, February 21, 1862, and inaugurated a movement to obtain custody of a contingent of them. A committee made up of Moses Fowler, T. T. Benbridge, R. C. Gregory, G. S. Orth and N. C. Dodge, was appointed to go to Indianapolis and lay the matter before Governor [Norton?]. This was done the next day, Saturday, the governor agreeing to send 800 of the [Secosh?] here.

The city then began making hasty preparations to receive and quarter the prisoners. Extra newspaper editions told the news and issued appeals for donations of food; the appeal was repeated the next morning in churches. The response was generous. The sheriff's office was soon filled with baskets, and the guard room of the jail also soon filled, providing enough to feed the prisoners bountifully (if unwidely, as it turned out), for several days.

The special train carrying the prisoners was due to arrive at 5 P.M., but a crowd began gathering about the South Street station as early as two. The vicinity was crowded, women predominating, despite universal mud. Thorntown Cyrus, one of the city's early and well known characters, amused the throng by reciting one of his thrilling poem, "closing with a glowing [eulogy?] on the life and character of the Pilgrim Fathers."

The train, over the Lafayette and Indianapolis, now the Big Four, was made up of 21 or 22 passenger and freight cars. Troops, acting as guards, held back the people and cleared a path which extended from the station, along the towpath of the Wabash and Erie canal, to the old Red warehouse, which has been hurriedly fitted up for the prisoners.

Many Young Men

Most of the prisoners were young men, pale, beardless boys, some under seventeen, members of the 32nd and 41st Tennessee regiments. They had served but four and one-half months. Few were in uniforms, most wearing butternut jeans. All carried huge

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bundles, containing blankets, etc., and many had old fashioned skilletts of the hoe cake pattern.

The Red warehouse, [where?] the prisoners were first taken, was at the foot of Chestnut Street, on the east side of the canal and near the present strawboard plant. The building was called "Red" because of its color, according to Lichael Tigue, [nonagenarian?], who remembers the prisoners. It was owned by W. K. Rochester, grandfather of Rochester Baird, local attorney, [who?] was a leading business man of the city then; a number of city sub-divisions still retain his name.

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The need of larger quarters was at once evident, and the prisoners were moved in a few days to the Sample porkhouse, owned by H. T. Sample, [Rsq?].

Provide Hospital

Many of the prisoners had severe colds, and 12 or 14 were seriously ill upon their arrival. The widespread illness among them was explained a little later by a prisoner, in a published statement. He related that they had suffered twenty days of unparalleled exposure and hardships before and after their capture.

This condition [suggested?] immediate steps to provide hospitalisation. A number of women, calling to their assistance Mr. Benbridge and J. B. Falley, with the consent of Col. John S. Williams, commanding officer of the 63rd regiment, guarding the prisoners, rented the "large and commodious room" known as Walsh's hall, now at 209.11 South Street, for a hospital. The room quickly was fitted with beds. The executive committee of women handling this matter was made up of Mrs. Lewis Falley, Miss Fields Stockwell, and Mrs. Dr. O.L. Clark.

Doctor Reports

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Dr. Thomas Chestnut was appointed by the citizens' committee as physician and surgeon for the sick. It seems he had some difficulty collecting from the government for his services, and so it is we have a letter he wrote later to Capt. H. [Freedly?], of the 3rd Infantry, Indianapolis, pressing his claim and giving information which other sources do not reveal. The letter is now a part of official government records dealing with the War of the Rebellion. He points out in his letter that a majority of prisoners were attacked by camp diarrhea, and that typhoid and pneumonia in the most malignant form, then broke out. He continues that [Tippecanoe?] hospital and the hospital in Walsh's hall were opened Feb. 25, and both were filled immediately.

Dr. Chestnut wrote that a list was lost a little later when he went to the battlefield of Corinth to help care for Union soldiers. The first month, he wrote, would average "[150?] patients per day; the second, 50 to 60 per day, and the last 10 or 12 days, not more than 20." This is the only reference found as to how long the sick prisoners may have remained here.

On Feb. 28 there were 29 patients in the South Street hospital. Dr. D. T. Yeakel, a local physician, in a published letter, states that this hospital had a capacity of 70. James Warden was the first prisoner to die, on March 3; Rev. William Graham, of the Fifth Street M. E. Church, conducted burial services in Greenbush.

The war department, in 1912, compiled a list of prisoners buried in Green bush, a copy of which is on file today in the [cemetery's?] office, according to R. E. [Acheson?], superintendent. The tombstones bear the simple inscription, ["UNY ?] - C.S.A." (C.S. A. - meaning, Confederate States of America.)

All did not run smoothly for the South Street hospital. The city council, at a meeting March 10, had complaints from residents of the vicinity holding the hospital a nuisance. A week later the council had a report that the South Street hospital had been abandoned. The patients had probably been moved to Tippecanoe camp hospital.

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Walsh Building

The Walsh building, a pretentious one for its day, carries a tablet between third story windows, with this inscriptions, "ERECTED 1857 - [M.K.?] Walsh." In 1862 it was in the center of the business district. A short distance east, at the south-east of Third and South, was the Bramble House, leading hostelry of the day, and on another corner was the Jones House, also popular. Across the street from Walsh hall was the residence of T.T. 6 Benbridge, grandfather of Dr. R. B. Wetherill. On Second Street, a little south, Dr. William Mayo had an office and practiced two years during this period; then he went to Rochester, Minn., where he established the famous clinic still bearing his name.

Lafayette's first city directory, published for 1858-59, lists M. M. Walsh an a grocer and provision dealer, on the south side of South Street, between Ohio (Third) and [Wabash?] (Second). His residence was given at the some address. Later directories give the name as Walsh, although at the some address, this spelling was also used in Dr. Chestnut's letter. Without doubt, however, Walsh and Walsh were the same man.

According to Walter J. Ball, retired Lafayette banker and authority on early city history, Mr. Walsh was a prominent democratic leader of the city in his day. Walsh's hall, probably the same room used for the hospital, was often used for party rallies and was the starting point for many torchlight parades. The property on which it is located has had many owners, including John Purdue, according to James M. Sharp, of the Mitchell agency. M. M. and Margaret Walsh owned it from 1857 to 1890, and it has been owned by August Goepp, Rensselaer, since 1919.

Mr. Walsh was the grandfather of H. C. Smith, Jr., member of the city school board and popular business man.

The Barracks

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Older residents do not agree as to the location of the main barracks for the prisoners, although records say the Sample porkhouse. Records also state that the 40th regiment used the same quarters. Ferdinand Jackson, 92, Went Lafayette Civil War veteran, and a resident of the county since 1855, confirms the published statements, stating the prisoners and also the 40th were quartered in what was a cooperage and storage room of the Sample porkhouse. Mr. Jackson recalls visiting an uncle who was a member 7 of the 40th, in this building, and also states that he once visited the rebels, at the same place. Others say this was a rough frame building, and Mr. Jackson says daylight could be seen between cracks in the boards.

John Collins, employed at the Dryfus plant over 50 years and now a watchman there, recalls the building to which Mr. Jackson refers. It stood on the exact site of the present cold storage plant, a part of the Dryfus establishment, and was torn down about 1902, he states.

Scandals in Camp

Lafayette had its own scandals in connection with the prisoners. April 7 an order was issued barring women from serving in the hospital, after there had been complaints they were sympathizing too much with the rebel sentiments of the prisoners. The escape April 29, of William March, brought this situation to a head. A grand jury (where members had an average of six children) is reported to have questioned six or eight ladies with reference to the escape, but [elicited?] nothing of value. The jury, asking instructions of Judge Test, hinted other scandals, such as [citizens?] holding private conferences with prisoners in their offices, and prisoners dining and visiting in local homes without guards.

Cemetery Markers

Sleeping beside the rebel prisoners in Greenbush cemetery, in an unbroken row, are 22 Union soldiers, whose graves are marked by stones with round tops, contrasting to the

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pointed stones over the Confederates. Those Union soldiers were killed in a wreck[,?] Oct. 31, 1864, when a passenger and cattle train collided near Culver, now Crane Station, eight miles south-east of Lafayette. Thirty were killed. The [dead?] and injured were brought to the Jones House, across from Walsh's hall, and those unclaimed were buried in Greenbush.

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Thus, nearly 80 years later, the old Walsh hall still stands as a memorial of that day, in Greenbush [cemetery?], 50 boys of the Blue and of the Gray, [foes?] in the war of 1861-65, still sleep side by side, many miles from the [scenes?] where their embattled brethren saw action under their respective banners.